

# TRAFFIC's engagement in the fight against illegal trade in elephant ivory

**TRAFFIC**  
the wildlife trade monitoring network

Photo © Martin Harvey / WWF-Canon

## African Elephant populations

In 1979, conventional wisdom suggested that there may be as many as 1.3 million African Elephants, but by 1989, the population was estimated to be as few as 609,000. Over the next two decades, numbers have fluctuated, rebounding in some regions and declining in others. Owing to the difficulty of carrying out accurate and synchronised survey work in large parts of elephant range, there is still considerable debate as to the total number but the most recent estimate lies somewhere between 550,000 and 680,000 elephants.

Elephants occur across much of sub-Saharan Africa and broadly speaking, their numbers are seriously declining in Central Africa, roughly steady but facing increasing challenges in West and East Africa, and possibly increasing in southern Africa. Significant elephant populations are nevertheless confined to well-protected areas, which form only a fraction of total elephant range. If conservation action is not forthcoming, elephants may soon become locally extinct in parts of Africa. The species is threatened by habitat loss, human-elephant conflict and illegal hunting, both for meat but especially for ivory, which is mainly smuggled to Asia to meet soaring demand there.

## Ivory use

Although the international commercial trade in ivory was banned in 1989, ivory has for centuries been utilized by carving industries in Africa and in Asia to create decorative or functional ornaments, such as bracelets, chopsticks, name seals or elaborate sculptures. Ivory in its various forms commands high regard as a luxury product status symbol, and the rising economic prosperity in parts of Asia has increased affordability, in turn leading to spiralling demand, particularly from China and Thailand, which today have the world's largest illegal ivory markets. Coupled with this has been the increasing influence and number of citizens from East Asia, particularly China, working and visiting the African continent, further cementing wildlife trade connections between the two continents.

### About TRAFFIC

TRAFFIC has a unique role as a specialist provider of solid information on wildlife trade leading to sound policy interventions and the implementation of practical working solutions to trade-related issues. Together these qualities make TRAFFIC the world's leading non-governmental organization dealing with wildlife trade issues, including our unique insight into the illicit trafficking of elephant ivory enabled by ETIS

## Poaching threat in Africa

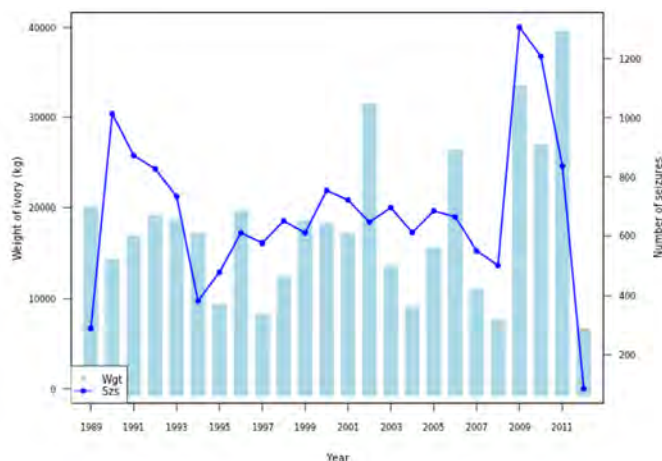
Although the precise number of elephants illegally killed each year in Africa is unknown, the figure is now believed to run into tens of thousands per annum—perhaps 25,000 or more. There is mounting evidence of the involvement of organized transnational criminal gangs, and even links to terrorist groups in this poaching and the international ivory trafficking that follows. For example, the United Nations recently issued an alert about the connection between poaching and the Lord's Resistance Army, while there has been media speculation linking the poaching gang who killed hundreds of elephants in northern Cameroon in March 2012 with the Sudanese Janjaweed militia. There has also been further conjecture about the involvement of Al-Shabab.

## Policy solutions – guided by ETIS

In 1989, TRAFFIC was mandated by the Parties to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) to create and manage a monitoring system to track trends in the illegal ivory trade over time. What is now known as the Elephant Trade Information System (ETIS) is the world's foremost collection of ivory and other elephant product seizures. Today, it contains nearly 20,000 records from some 90 countries or territories worldwide since 1989.

The most recent ETIS analysis demonstrates that **illegal trade in elephant ivory is at its highest levels in two decades with trade in 2011 some three times greater than the scale of the illicit trade in 1998.**

Estimated weight of ivory and number of seizure cases by year, 1989-2012 (data for 2012 incomplete)



Source: ETIS report to CITES, June 2012

Successive ETIS analyses have had an immense impact through their provision of objective assessments of ivory trade dynamics to guide CITES policy and interventions for elephants. ETIS outputs assist CITES Parties to combat illegal trade by identifying the underlying drivers and focusing attention upon those countries most heavily implicated in illicit commerce. For example, in 2002, the first comprehensive ETIS analysis identified China as the major driver of illicit ivory trade at a time when the world's attention was still focused on Japan as the major consumer. Likewise, the Philippines' role as both a transit point for illegal ivory and as an emerging domestic ivory market was first identified in 2007. And ETIS analyses have persistently recognized Thailand as among the top countries in the world most heavily implicated in the illicit trade.

Indeed, the Thai Prime Minister, Yingluck Shinawatra, speaking in Bangkok at the opening ceremony to the CITES Conference of the Parties in March 2013, tacitly recognized the ETIS results and unexpectedly announced that her country would be pursuing "the goal of putting an end to ivory trade to be in line with international norms".

During that CITES meeting, there was unprecedented uptake of the ETIS results presented by TRAFFIC, which identified those countries most heavily implicated in the flow of illegal ivory. CITES Parties quickly moved to adopt a Decision to create a "CITES Ivory Enforcement Task Force" to work with the countries of "primary concern" identified in the ETIS analysis and eight nations have been directed to produce ivory trade action plans, with milestones and time frames, for immediate implementation. The Task Force will include China, (with Hong Kong separately represented), Kenya, Malaysia, Philippines, South Africa, Thailand, Tanzania and Viet Nam, plus Uganda, as well as the International Coalition to Combat Wildlife Crime (ICWC) partner organisations. As some three-quarters of the illegal ivory trade since 2009 has moved through or to these countries according to ETIS analysis, a focused collaborative law enforcement body operating all along this trade chain holds promise for scaling up investigations and enforcement actions in the future.

In another CITES Decision taken at that meeting, the countries of "secondary concern" in the ETIS analysis were compelled to report to the CITES Secretariat on their implementation of CITES provisions concerning control of ivory and ivory markets. These countries comprise Cameroon, the Congo, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Egypt, Ethiopia, Gabon, Mozambique, Nigeria and Uganda.

TRAFFIC also actively supported a number of policy recommendations during this meeting that were subsequently adopted within a CITES Resolution. They included the compulsory annual reporting of all ivory stockpiles held by governments worldwide; the mandatory forensic examination of all large-scale ivory seizures of 500 kg or more; the

inclusion of "demand reduction" as a necessary course of action in end-use markets; the tracking of trade in live elephants; and a compliance mechanism, including the threat of sanctions, when Parties fail to implement the requirements of the Resolution.

## Practical solutions

TRAFFIC supports the *use of wildlife detector dogs* at several airports, seaports and postal distribution centres in Europe and Africa to detect wildlife products including elephant ivory.

TRAFFIC has *trained thousands of enforcement officers* worldwide in identification and detection of illegal wildlife products, including ivory products.

TRAFFIC has identified and facilitated the *monitoring and registration of government-held elephant ivory stocks* with recommended minimum standards and best practices for stockpile management to ensure that ivory, tonnes of which are accumulated annually by elephant range States through natural mortality as well as that obtained through seizures, does not "leak" into illegal trade.

In 2012, TRAFFIC acted as an *independent auditor of government-held ivory stockpiles* prior to their destruction by authorities in Gabon and has also carried out this role in the Central African Republic.

TRAFFIC is working closely with authorities in China to develop *strategies to reduce the demand* for illegal wildlife products.

Working closely with the relevant regional bodies, TRAFFIC has been actively engaged in assisting countries establish and operationalize *regional wildlife enforcement networks* in South-East Asia, South Asia and Central Africa.

## Raising awareness

**In May 2007**, TRAFFIC drew attention to how Asian-run organized crime syndicates based in Africa were implicated in the increase in illegal trade in elephant ivory.

**In March 2010**, TRAFFIC highlighted a series of ivory enforcement failures in parts of Africa and Asia.

**In December 2011**, TRAFFIC dubbed 2011 the "Annus horribilis" for African Elephants after ivory trafficking had risen to unprecedented levels, including a record number of large-scale seizures that year.

**In January 2012**, TRAFFIC highlighted Egypt's significant role in the growing illegal ivory trade, through an article published in the *TRAFFIC Bulletin*.

**In June 2012**, TRAFFIC and CITES together warned of the "highest elephant poaching and ivory smuggling rates in a decade."

**From August 2012 to July 2013**, TRAFFIC partnered with WWF to raise global awareness and concern over the growing menace of illegal wildlife trade, in particular the trafficking of ivory and rhino horn from Africa to Asia.

**In December 2012**, TRAFFIC reported on one of the world's largest ever ivory seizures that took place in Malaysia—more than 6 tonnes, en route to China.

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